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"What's past is prologue": the Age of Caliban*

The poor monster's my subject, and he shall not suffer indignity.
William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*[1]

Abstract

The article provides a brief comparative study of the reception history of Shakespeare's Caliban in the early modern period and in the contemporary literary criticism. The analysis aims to delineate a fundamental difference in the reception of the character of Caliban throughout the ages which I attribute to a historical shift in the understanding of the notions of humanity and monstrosity.

The first part of the article concentrates on the description of the historical and social circumstances of the Elizabethan discourse of monstrosity and draws a link between them and the literary and political context of the time, while engaging into a close reading of *The Tempest* that brings to the fore the origin and nature of the "servant-monster." The second part of the paper focuses on the gradual change in the interpretations of Caliban who ceased to be seen as a monstrosity and with time acquired undeniably human characteristics. That shift has been observable since the 19th century and has found its culmination in the postcolonial strain of Caliban's contemporary interpretations, in which Prospero's slave becomes a native trying to find a language for himself in a colonial regime his body and mind are subjugated to. The postcolonial project of the unfinished monstrous humanity of Sycorax's son is congruous with the postmodern condition that can be dubbed, to use Harold Bloom's phrase, "the Age of Caliban." It is exactly that liminal and paradoxical notion of monstrous humanity that resides at the core of the contemporary fascination with "Monsieur Monster."

Keywords: bestial man, Caliban, cultural studies, English drama, monstrosity, postcolonial studies, Prospero, reception history, Renaissance literature, Shakespeare

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* An earlier, and very much different version of this article appeared as "«What claimed our love and compassion was misshapen humanity in all its forms». Sick Caliban's story", ed. M. Bates, vol. IV, *The Monstrous Identity of Humanity: Proceedings of the Fifth Global Conference*, Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2008, pp. 133–140.

[1] W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 3.2. 34–35, eds. A.T. Vaughan and V.M. Vaughan, London: Thompson Learning, 2007, p. 226. All the consecutive quotes come from this edition.

"What's past is prologue"[2]

What is Caliban? Or, as the contemporary critical idiom has it, who is Caliban? In-between these two questions lies the vast territory of theoretical reflection, readerly fancy and theatrical performance that spans almost four centuries of ontological guesswork. Attempts at locating Caliban's origin have been repeatedly reflected in the plethora of performances and critical readings of *The Tempest*, as that after all minor character has gradually become the object of query for literary critics, writers, artists and theatre directors alike, ultimately assuming a crucial role in the contemporary interpretations of the play. Numerous literary allusions point to the fact that he has started to live a life of his own, as a cultural icon imbued with a peculiar significance of a character that embodies bestial humanity on the one hand and human monstrosity on the other. Such an elevation of the "puppy-headed[3]" monster that has taken place within the realm of literary *imaginatio* seems rather unexpected considering the fact that Shakespeare's creation is not a true *rerum avis*, as even his ontological ambiguity does not render him more appallingly monstrous or threatening than, say, the unholy offspring of Bram Stoker or the rotten fruit of Mary Wollstonecraft-Shelley's imagination. Historically speaking, there has even been a tendency to sentimentalize the whole of the play and ignore its ambiguities, with Caliban at the lead. The interest in this particular character has not been continuous: it waned around the eighteenth century when the figure of the "poor monster[4]" was removed from adaptations of the play as not altogether matching its sweetened content, to rekindle almost a century later and continue with added strength to this day.

We might say that the visible proof of the nineteenth and twentieth century recurrence of the interest in the figure of Caliban is that, to put the matter in Alden T. Vaughan and Virgina Mason Vaughan's words, "none of these characters, nor any other in Shakespeare's canon, has undergone the extreme range of metamorphoses that have marked Caliban's tumultuous career."[5] A tortoise; a fish; a most abominable monster; a missing link in the history of the human species; a pre-allegorical form of a psychic process; a (de)humanized representative of colonized nations subjugated to the will of cruel Prosperos; a socio-political allegory – Caliban has become the core of post-Romantic, Darwinian, psychoanalytic, allegorical, biographic, and postcolonial interpretations of *The Tempest* (to name only a few), and ultimately a graceful subject of such passionate comparative cultural studies as *Shakespeare's Caliban. A Cultural History* or *Constellation Caliban. Figuration of a Character*. At the same time the "moon-calf[6]" has made his way to

[2] Ibid., 2.1.251, p. 202.

[3] Ibid., 2.2.148, p. 216.

[4] Ibid., 3.2.35, p. 226.

[5] A.T. Vaughan and V.M. Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History*, Cambridge: CUP, 1991, p. XIV.

[6] W. Shakespeare, op. cit., 2.2.105, p. 213. Cf. Lie N. and T. D'haen, *Constellation Caliban*: *Figurations of a Character*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997.

a number of major literary works of the twentieth century,[7] and started to serve as a synecdoche for virtually human (dis)order. Although precise attitudes towards monstrosity in the early seventeenth century are not easily recoverable, *The Tempest* and its various con-texts allow us a glimpse of what constituted the Renaissance notion of the monstrous, at least with respect to Caliban.

The purpose of this paper is to look at a small part of the intersection of history, stage history, literature and the shifting critical attention that Caliban has been endowed with in order to offer a brief introductory account of his place and role in Shakespearean *Tempest* and in literary criticism that has grown around the play. A reading through such historical lens should bring out basic differences in the interpretive treatment of the "abhorred slave[8]": ultimately it will serve me to problematize the notions of humanity and monstrosity prevalent both in the Renaissance England and in the contemporary Western culture. However, the scope of the present paper allows me to consider only chosen seventeenth century intertexts in order to explain the sources of Caliban's monstrosity and provide a generalized comment on the twentieth century approaches to this figure. The paper will be concluded with a preemptive argument on the reasons for a qualitative change in the approach towards that "poor monster" which we can observe in (post)modern culture in general and in postcolonial criticism of Shakespeare's play in particular.

Caliban's *Monstropomorphosis*: Monster Transformed; or, the Artificial Changeling Historically Presented[9]

The Tempest is a text that has long intrigued its readers and audiences alike with its ambivalent and antithetical interpretative potential. A broad range of approaches towards the play certifies to the fact that its very nature is arguable, as generically it can be ascribed to an experiment in a mixed mode of drama, tragicomedy, or a romance, whereas its content has been described as an amalgam of diverse stories, or as a textual hybrid. As A.D. Nuttall puts it:

> One of the reasons why *The Tempest* is hard to classify lies in its parentage. It has two sets of sources, first a body of romantic, fairy-tale literature and second a collection of travelers' reports. If its mother was a mermaid, its father was a sailor.[10]

This peculiar marriage of the fantastic and the circumstantial well professes to the ambivalences that surround the interpretations of the context of *The Tempest*, its text, and every single of its characters, with the notable example of Caliban.

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[7] E.g. J. Fowles, *The Magus* (1966); P. West, *Caliban Filibuster* (1971); T. Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock* (1939).

[8] W. Shakespeare, op. cit., 1.2.353, p. 175.

[9] The title of the section alludes to John Bulwer's *Anthropometamorphosis*, "Man Transformed; or, the Artificial Changeling Historically Presented" (London, 1654) that is discussed in such studies as D. Hillman and C. Mazzio's *Body in Parts*, New York: Routledge, 1997.

[10] A.D. Nuttall, *Two Concepts of Allegory. A Study of Shakespeare's* The Tempest *and the Logic of Allegorical Expression*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 136.

Needless to say, his genealogy resembles that of the play, and raises as many questions. The son of the "blue-eyed hag"[11] of Algiers was brought onto the island together with his witch-mother and left there by sailors:

> This damned witch Sycorax,
> For mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible
> To enter human hearing, from Algiers,
> ... was banished. For one thing she did
> They would not take her life...
> This blue-eyed hag was hither brought with child
> And here was left by th' sailors....
> Then was this island
> (Save for the son that she did litter here,
> A freckled whelp hag-born) not honoured with
> A human shape.[12]

In this first mention of the "freckled whelp" that we are provided with by his master, Caliban's humanity is not much of an issue but a rather negligible matter that can be treated parenthetically. Prospero's lack of consideration in this respect can be read as a sign of overall indifference and disregard for his servant, to the extent that allows the editors of the First Folio to virtually pass the question over with a parenthetical gesture that at first glance seems to underscore a decidedly nonchalant attitude towards Sycorax's son, but in an afterthought raises some concern as to its ideological intent.[13] To my mind it opens itself to the readings which approach the question of Caliban's origin from the perspective of the early modern fascination with alterity and otherness: Prospero as it is downplays Caliban's humanity which renders the character less appealing and more terrifying to the early modern audience.

It is true that the shipwreck luring us into the story and the whole question of Caliban's origin introduce into the play a whole range of connotations with European attitudes towards the newly discovered lands and peoples, and it is not a sheer coincidence that the play was written around the time of the formation of the Virginia Company and proliferation of such exploration narratives as Sylvester Jourdain's *Discovery of the Barmudas* (1610) or William Strachey's *True Reportory of the Wrack* (first published in 1625, but available in a manuscript form already in 1610). Undoubtedly, the topoi of miraculous survival, cannibalism, half-human bestiality and monstrousness of the encountered natives are widespread in travel narratives of the time and are well-reflected in the iconography of the Brave New World. No wonder, it has been repeatedly inferred that they might have easily influenced contemporaneous reception of the play in general and the interpretation of Caliban's character in particular. However, we cannot follow this critical vein to claim that this was the primary context which was formative for the treatment of the figure of Caliban in Shakespeare's times. There are studies of *The Tempest* which assert that the conquest and economic exploitation of the

[11] W. Shakespeare, op. cit., 1.2.270, p. 168.
[12] Ibid., 1.2.263–284, pp. 168–169.
[13] I.e. ideological in Alhusserian sense.

new continent did not play such an important role at that time and that their comparative scale has been exaggerated by the insistence of the postcolonial school of thought on the political nature of the subaltern agenda. To continue with A.D. Nuttall's metaphor, we can say that the maritime part of Caliban's lineage is not only circumstantial but partial as well, for it excludes the influences that would be more home-bound and more immediate to Shakespeare's audience than the colonial experience limited to the New World. As Mark Thornton Burnett convincingly argues:

> Caliban's unassimilable alterity has been understandable only through the tried and trusted tropes of contemporary travellers' tales. Over the course of *The Tempest* as a whole, however, interpretive systems closer to home are brought into play to situate Shakespeare's «savage and deformed slave»... As... interlaced constructions of Caliban suggest, *The Tempest* discovers 'monstrosity' by depending on a variety of theoretical paradigms.[14]

Among the theoretical paradigms that I deem most significant for the figuration of Caliban in the early modern theatre are those that reverberate most strongly within what I would like to call the Renaissance discourse of monstrosity: a set of cultural beliefs and practices clustered round the notion of the non-human. On one side of the contextual continuum rest such familiar analogues as folktales of the wild man or *wodewose* who functions as a social symbol for nature that can be curbed only by the civilizing force of royal authority. Such is the position of the *wodewose* in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, where this "wilde and salvage man."

> Yet was no man, but only like in shape,
> And eke in stature higher by a span,
> All ouergrowne with haire, that could awhape
> And hardy hart, and his wide mouth did gape
> With huge great teeth, like to a tusked Bore:
> For he liu'd all on rauin and on rape
> Of men and beasts; and fed on fleshy gore,
> The signe whereof yet stain'd his bloudy lips afore.[15]

Both this passage and the mode of characterization of Caliban in the play suggest extremity/abnormality in physical appearance and a decided lack of civility, from which stems radical categorial instability within the binary system of classifications as human/non-human. Indeed, one of the first preserved comments on Caliban, coming from Ben Jonson's Induction to *Bartholomew Fair* provides an allusion to the character as a "Servant-monster,"[16] whereas in the 1623 Folio edition of *The Tempest* Caliban is described in the cast of characters as a "salvage and deformed slave."[17] This introductory description suggests a twofold approach to the very conception of Caliban that is informed by his non-specific natural deformity and his low social standing. Caliban's non-defined disfigurement on the

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[14] M.T. Burnett, *Constructing 'Monsters' in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 133.

[15] E. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 4.7.5, London 1977, p. 473.

[16] B. Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. F.B. Partridge, Lincoln: University of Nebrasca Press, 1964, p. 10.

[17] A.T. Vaughan and V.M. Vaughan, op. cit., p. 7.

one hand and servitude of a rather oblique nature on the other are the categories that position him in-between the animal and the human realm, whereas his professed lack of *mother* tongue places him at the border of the human, if not beyond it. The undecidability of the bestial/human is repeatedly invoked in the play, for reactions of other characters continually invite and frustrate characterization of Caliban as either a human being or an animal. The play titillates the reader/the audience's imagination with obsolete descriptions of the monster's bodily traits, allowing for wild speculations as to the nature of the "thing of darkness", ostensibly composed of human and/or animal features. We might say that if Caliban is perceived by the majority of the characters as human then he is a human "in a diminished sense,"[18] since he seems to be unable (or unwilling) to exert rational control over his passions. The obvious and unquestionable indicators of thus *constructed* monstrousness are violence, lack of temperance or *ingenium*, and finally, libidinousness that is focused on Miranda. Caliban then exists in an aporetic refusal to divide nature and culture, the bestial and the human element. What seems to be at stake here is the other, philosophical element in the contextual continuum of theoretical paradigms shaping the Renaissance reception of Caliban: the homocentric Aristotelian notion of natural slavery coupled with what Marie Helène Huet dubs the principle of "parental singularity."[19] Natural slaves can qualify as human according to Aristotle but they are deficient in their natural "deliberative capacity":

> Whenever there is the same wide discrepancy between human beings as there is between soul and body or between man and beast, then those whose condition is such that their function is the use of their bodies and nothing better can be expected of them, those, I say, are slaves by nature.[20]

Caliban is defunct in this respect to the extent which renders formal instruction in the art of good living almost impossible – as both Prospero and Miranda suggest. That fault of his is only too natural, as he is the rotten fruit of aberrant procreation, in which the role of the dominant (the only known) party is assumed by his witch-mother. The "puppy-headed" monster is a natural child of nobody, for he has no father and therefore no significant kin that would *impress* upon him the standards of civility, and therefore he must be deemed unnatural "hag-*seed*", "a bastard one" of "vile race": nothing more and nothing less than "a born devil."[21]

It has been repeatedly claimed that *The Tempest* is a *psychomachia,* in which good and evil struggle over the possession of one's soul. Such a reading can be transposed onto plainer regions of political allegory, in which the island itself is suggestive of the stage mirroring the body politic of the state, with Caliban representing the "mooncalf" of post-Reformation England: the unruly, mutinous

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[18] B. Cummings, "Animal Passions and Human Sciences: Shame, Blushing and Nakedness in Early Modern Europe and the New World", *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period*, eds. E. Fudge et al., Basingstoke: Palgrave Publishers, 2002, p. 41.

[19] M.-H. Huet, *Monstrous Imaginaton*, Cambridge–London: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 36.

[20] Aristotle, *The Politics*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992, pp. 68–69.

[21] W. Shakespeare, op. cit., 1.2.367, p. 176, italics mine; 5.1.273, p. 201; 1.2.358, p. 175; 4.1.188, p. 256.

mob. The context of *The Tempest* provides ample ground for speculation on the correlation between the major plot of the play – the royal marriage of Miranda and Fernando – and the wedding celebration for James I's daughter. It remains a matter of conjecture whether "James and his family are re-presented in *The Tempest* through the issues of peaceful succession, royal genealogy, interpretation and the union of the kingdoms,"[22] but if we consider Caliban's rape attempt, his overall lack of subordination and his abortive rebellion in the light of what Gary Schmidgall calls "courtly aesthetic,"[23] it will become clear that the aggressive descriptions of Sycorax's son as a brutish creature with no male parent *per se* are constructed around the political notions of a breach of sovereignty and struggle over territorial dominance. *The Tempest* provides an exotic spectacle in which the rebellious ruled is cast as a monstrous character for he no longer wishes to assume the position of cultural marginality he has hitherto occupied. In this way he personifies social evil discussed e.g. in Tudor homilies on disobedience and rebellion. Thus, as an agent of subversive forces – a wayward subject working to topple the established order – Caliban becomes an exponent of monstrosity articulated in moral and social terms that are rooted in the Renaissance notions of civility on the one hand and in Aristotelian notions of natural superiority of masters and fathers on the other. After all:

> It is the vices of ingratitude, rebellion and disobedience, particularly towards parents, that most commonly attract the appelation «monstrous»: to be a monster is to break the natural bonds of obligation towards friends and especially towards blood-relations... Long before the monster of Frankenstein, monstrosity already implied rebellion, or an unexpected turning against one's parent or benefactor.[24]

On being human: "a bunch of more or less angry words"[25]

On page 32 of the 1778 edition of *The Tempest* we find the following assertion: "The *metathesis* in *Caliban* for *Cannibal* is evident. FARMER."[26] The annotation was introduced by Rev. Richard Farmer, principal librarian of Cambridge University and master of Emmanuel College. The "indisputable" anthropophagic etymology of Caliban's name which turns out to be the product of a single annotation was a mark of the expansionist interpretations of Caliban's nature. Even though cannibalistic exploits of Caliban are rather dubious in themselves (just like the ascription of the practice to the Caribs made by Columbus in the absence of any

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[22] D.M. Bergeron, *Shakespeare's Romances and the Royal Family*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1985, p. 181.

[23] G. Schmigdal, *Shakespeare and the Courtly Aesthetic*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

[24] C. Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity and Nineteenth-Century Writing*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, p. 13.

[25] Roberto Fernández Retamar's remark descrbing his own essay "Calibán" in an interview with González Echevarria, *Diacritics* 8(4), 1978, pp. 83–84.

[26] *The Plays of William Shakespeare...*, eds. S. Hohnson and G. Steevens, vol. I, 1778, p. 32. Qtd. in: A.T. Vaughan and V.M. Vaughan, op. cit., p. XX.

empirical evidence), the text of the play as such invites a strong conclusion that for quite a long time the character *was* indeed viewed as a *monstrum horrendum* of the stage. As a vicious, brutal creature with beastly qualities and subversive intent that confined him to the margins of the seventeenth century *civitas*, Caliban would be treated in the post-Renaissance theatre as a beast or even less than that – as a character so marginal that he could altogether be removed from theatrical productions. Only gradually did he acquire new significance that would finally prompt William Hazlitt to claim in 1817 that "the character of Caliban is generally thought (and justly so) to be one of the author's masterpieces."[27] The "servant-monster[28]" became accordingly involved in a slow and turbulent process of anthropomorphisation. As a force questioning the given social order, he turned into a "bestial man,"[29] a "natural man", a "savage clown,"[30] a missing Darwinian link, and finally, into the embodiment of a colonized, but undeniably human "Other."[31]

The momentum in the process of Caliban's becoming human would come, however, with the appropriation of his character by a number of "self-proclaimed Calibans,"[32] non-white non-European artists, among whom we need to mention George Lamming, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Aimé Césaire and Roberto Fernández Retamar. Indeed it was Retamar who in his 1971 essay "Calibán" stressed that things literary should be considered not only from Prospero's but also from Caliban's perspective. Postcolonial appeals to treat Caliban as an exemplar of subaltern human values formed an undercurrent in the discourse on the colonized Brave New Worlds (wherever they might be located) and were soon joined by cultural materialist and New Historicist interpretations of the play as a document of Western expansion and exploitation. We may well recount the main premise of the argument that emerges from the writings of those calibanesque critics who have successfully peopled the enchanted island of the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's *Tempest* criticism:

> Although to some literary critics he is still a monster or benevolent wild man, he now most frequently symbolizes the exploited native – of whatever continent and whatever color – who struggles for freedom, dignity, and self-determination from European and American Prosperos.[33]

Within this paradigm the undeniably human dyad Prospero/Caliban comes to stand for what we can call after Antonio Gramsci a manifestation of hegemonic

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[27] W. Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, 1817, p. 118 Qtd. in. W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, A New Variorum Edition of William Shakespeare, vol. IX, 1892, p. 381.

[28] W. Shakespeare, op. cit., 3.2.3, p. 225.

[29] J.E. Hankins, "Caliban, the Bestial Man", *PMLA*, LXII 1947, p. 793–801.

[30] J.C. McCloskey, "Caliban, Savage Clown" *College Eng.* 1, 1940, pp. 354–357.

[31] Cf. V.M. Vaughan, "«Something Rich and Strange»: Caliban's Theatrical Metamorphoses", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 36(4) 1985, pp. 390–405; A.T. Vaughan, "Shakespeare's Indian: The Americanization of Caliban", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39(20), 1988, pp. 137–153.

[32] J. Bate, "Caliban and Ariel Write Back", *Shakespeare Survey Volume 48: Shakespeare and Cultural Exchange*, ed. S. Wells, Cambridge 1996 (Cambridge Collections Online, 13 July 2011).

[33] A.T. Vaughan and V.M. Vaughan, op. cit. p. XXII.

dominance.[34] In this context it is the dominance of the Western ethno- and logocentric humanism that allows the subaltern colonized subject to speak only within the Western system of significations and to exist only insofar as (s)he is found productive. Caliban's body and mind have been claimed by Prospero, and therefore the "abhorred slave's" language resonates with the rythms of Western poetic refinement, but he himself utters sentiments that profess to its incapacitating power:

> You taught me language, and my profit on't
> Is, I know how to curse: the red plague rid you
> For learning me your language.[35]

As the site of one's (biological, ethnic, cultural) identity language is a cultural symbol, and yet in the sphere of hegemonic dominance it becomes a tool of exerting control over the colonized subject. Consequently, much critical attention has been given to the crucial notion of Caliban's native voice and the language that he speaks, for the very obvious reason that the very ability to communicate would question Caliban's status as non-human. In the postcolonial paradigm the "civilizing mission" of Prospero is ostensibly to make Caliban transcend his savage condition by any means possible and is therefore intimately linked with teaching him those two Western markers of humanity: refined language and good manners. However, the project is grounded in the basic assumption of Caliban's unredeemable savagery and therefore is bound to backfire, allowing the exiled duke to reach for more direct means of control: physical coercion and downright violence. As noted by the proponents of postcolonialism and New Historicism, savagism of this kind was a widespread notion. It suffices to point at Stephen Greenblatt's famous essay "Learning to Curse" in which he cites a number of Spanish, Portuguese and English authorities, all universally claiming that the inhabitants of the new world had no culture nor language of their own and therefore the colonizers had every moral right to civilize them at their will[36]. Such an imposition of power would obviously demand the use of discourse of monstrosity to construe the colonized as a non-human population and effectively take away from them the ability to communicate in an intelligible human language their reservations against the act of colonisation.

The polemic over Caliban's linguistic power(lessness) has extended to cover various propositions, but the vast majority of critics would contend with a claim succintly summarized by Paul Brown who notes:

> Caliban's eloquence is after all «your language», the language of the coloniser... Caliban's dream is not the antithesis but the apotheosis of colonialist discourse. If this discourse seeks to efface its own power, then here at last is an eloquent spokesman who is powerless.[37]

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[34] In the years to come postcolonial criticism moved beyond the examination of only that couple, to encompass also the positions of Sycorax and Miranda, raising not only the question of gender but also of heteronormativity in the play; this, however, goes beyond the already limited scope of this study.

[35] W. Shakespeare, op. cit., 1.2.364–366, p. 176.

[36] S. Greenblatt, "Learning to Curse", first published in 1976 in *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old*; reprint in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, New York–London: Routledge, 1992.

[37] P. Brown, "«This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine»: *TheTempest* and the Discourse of Colonialism", *Political Shakespeare*, Ithaca–London 1985, p. 66.

Within the postcolonial paradigm a battle against the colonial enterprise would be tantamount to triumphing over the lack of linguistic power that Caliban indeed displays, but only at times. It is exactly Caliban's mimicking, parodistic verbal behaviour that is seen by some to be an effective resistance strategy for discarding colonial control: after all, owing to Prospero's abandonment of the island he is finally left on it as its sole possessor, which we may hazard a guess, would not be the issue, had he been a more compliant, and a less irksome slave. We need to remember that

> the redemptive project of overcoming colonialism is to return the natives to themselves. But who exactly are these «natives»? What is their gender? What is their ethnicity? What is their class? What is their sexual orientation? What are their modes of self-fashioning?[38]

These are the questions that can be asked only when the affirmative claim to humanity has been acknowledged, once the binary opposition between humanity and monstrosity has been unmasked as a non-definite construction. How else should we interpret Prospero's claim at the end of *The Tempest*: "this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine"[39]? We could say that throughtout the course of the play Caliban tries to "return to himself" by willfully (mis)approprating the terms of the dominant ideology: proprietorship of the land, insistence on reproduction, one stable identity, etc. In this he critically rearticulates Prospero's desire for a perfectly obedient copy of the master. In such a reading a parodistic re-enactment of colonialist discourse seems to be a clear sign of "spectacular resistance" advocated by one of the most eminent exponents of postcolonial theory, Homi Bhabha, who writes:

> To the extent to which discourse is a form of defensive warfare, then mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance. When the words of the master become the site of hybridity – the warlike sign of the native – then we may not only read between the lines, but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain.[40]

Caliban's "sly civility[41]" is a marker of resistance to the civilizing project of Prospero. In this light his otherwise oblique song "Ban' Ban' Ca-caliban[42]" acquires a new significance as a "warlike sign of the native" who attempts to shift the monological discourse of Prospero to a more disseminative linguistic project. By mimicking and abusing his oppressor's language Caliban attempts to reassert his identity as a speaking "thing-in-itself" who does not require to be a Western (ostensibly) monolithic, phallogocentric "I" in order to become human. In the twentieth century the Shakespearian monster became something more or something less than a monstrosity: an exponent of humanity that is not tied to one, un-

[38] D. Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 204.

[39] Shakespeare, op. cit., 5.1.276–277, p. 281.

[40] H.K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 172.

[41] Ibid., pp. 93–101.

[42] W. Shakespeare, op. cit., 2.2.179, p. 218.

changeable idea of subjectivity. In this Caliban seems to excel as a perfect (post) human: always *becoming* and never *being*.

The Age of Caliban[43]

Even in this brief consideration of the reception history of *The Tempest* we need to remember that romantic and post-romantic anthropologies were by no means homogeneous in their treatment of the human subject, but they would almost uniformly take up the notion of monstrosity and endow it with a human potential for endless creation and endless destruction. Such self-reflection would lead to a shift in the perception of humanity, ultimately bringing about a denial of the powerful statement about the discontinuity of man and nature that had been made by Christianity. It is exactly the blurring of the boundaries between nature and culture that allows us to understand the shift in the approach to the monstrous in the nineteenth century; and it is the twentieth century's uncovering of these boundaries as an epistemological construct that shook the fundamental opposition between humanity and monstrosity. That shift allows us to understand the nature of the discrepancy between the early modern – expansionist – reception of the character and his (post)modern (postcolonial) readings.

The Tempest is among other things a masque unmasking its fundamental assumptions as to the nature of humanity/monstrosity. Its allegorical potential allows us to utilize it as a mode of expression for the most contemporary of our cultural dilemmas. What is a cultural dilemma in the age of overwhelming institutional control, non-definite definitions, leaky bodies and failed distinctions? It seems that the subaltern Caliban's story is the lot that befalls all of us, as we are caught in the involuntary mimickry of institutionalized forces that strive to overpower us; the catastrophic incident of speech that does not communicate our intent; the language that we are forced to learn in order to express our carnal appetites and immoderate desires; the liberating and yet constricting impossible project of *becoming* human. We live in the Age of Caliban whether we want it or not and that leaves us with no other choice but to "profit on't", even if we do it – with curses.

[43] The subtitle comes from Harold Bloom's assertion that "We are now in *the Age of Caliban* rather than in the Time of Ariel or the Era of Prospero Shakespeare" qtd. in. N. Lie, T. D'haen, "Preface", *Constellation Caliban*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997, p. ii.